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FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4475

INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1892

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4157

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5776

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0862

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0143

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 002093

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM ASEAN BU SN

SUBJECT: BURMA: ASEAN'S GAMBARI CANCELLATION SPARKS SMALL PROTESTS

REF: A. SINGAPORE 1822

- 1B. SINGAPORE 1889
- 1C. SINGAPORE 2075
- 1D. SINGAPORE 2085
- 1E. SINGAPORE 2086

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: ASEAN's ambivalent handling of the Burma issue during its ongoing cycle of ASEAN-related summits appears to have been met with mixed feelings among Burmese nationals and their sympathizers living in Singapore. The announcement that ASEAN had canceled UN Special Advisor Ibrahim Gambari's planned briefing of the East Asia Summit provoked small groups of demonstrators to go a bit beyond their previously careful observance of Singapore's tight restrictions on public demonstrations. Press reporting indicated Burma activists were upset about the cancellation and unhappy with ASEAN's apparent failure to put any teeth into its demands for political reform. On the other hand, some protesters thought it was important that ASEAN got Burma to sign onto the human rights and good governance commitments contained in its landmark Charter. Singapore's government-controlled press continued to cast the Burmese community and activists in a favorable light. END SUMMARY

12. (U) A small number of Burmese nationals and activists living in Singapore took to the streets in protest again near the venue for the ongoing ASEAN-related summit meetings on November 20. Carrying candles and wearing red T-shirts bearing the slogan, "We pursue peace, justice and democracy for Burma," a group of nine foreign students, including Burmese, tried to approach the Shangri-la hotel where ASEAN leaders are meeting. Police stopped the students before they reached the hotel. Police took the particulars of the protesters, apparently to signal that protests - even those which are sympathetically viewed - would not be allowed to go too far.. Media reported that another group of 40 Burmese nationals gathered down the street from the Summit venue and held up banners that said, "Signing Charter with Generals Makes ASEAN a Laughing Stock" and "ASEAN has Power to Make a Difference." After several minutes police officers approached the group, which dispersed quietly.

13. (U) In separate incidents, news media reported that two different Burmese-led organizations in Singapore circulated petitions to protest ASEAN's lack of concrete action on Burma. "SG Human Rights", an activist group which formed last month, tried to deliver a 40-signature petition to ASEAN

leaders, calling on them to use all means at their disposal to bring about democratic change in Burma. However, police officers would not allow them to approach the Summit venue and the activists agreed to turned the petition over to a member of the ASEAN Summit Secretariat. The Overseas Burmese Patriots, a group of 20 students, professionals, and workers resident in Singapore delivered a petition signed by 3,626 people to MP Irene Ng, who will forward it to the UN through the Singapore Foreign Ministry. Three members claiming to represent the Overseas Burmese Patriots also approached the embassy on November 20 to present us with the same petition, which calls on the UNSC to intervene in Burma in the interest of peace and reconciliation. (Post will forward the petition to EAP/MLS via pouch.)

¶4. (SBU) While the protests were small, they are significant in Singapore where public gatherings of 5 or more persons require a permit. Permit requests are rarely granted, and authorities normally take a hard-line against groups that do not have one (ref A and B). (In contrast to the leniency authorities continued to show Burmese protesters, police arrested two members of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party, Chee Siock Chin and John Tan, as they approached the Shangri-la Hotel on November 20.) These restrictions are well known, and recent Burma protesters have generally taken care to observe them. The November 20 protests appeared to go further in crossing government red-lines than earlier ones. The protesters appeared to be reacting in anger to ASEAN summit events, in particular the cancellation of Gambari's briefing. However, other protestors noted that the Summit had achieved some good: "At least the generals have signed the Charter, which obliges them to protect human rights."

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¶5. (SBU) Interestingly, Singapore's government controlled media continued to cast the Burmese protesters in a favorable light, even as they skirted the law and criticized ASEAN and the Singapore government. The Straits Times newspaper quoted by name a Burmese business student saying that he and his compatriots "feel that ASEAN, including the Singapore government, is ignoring the desire and wishes of the Burmese people for freedom and democracy." At the same time, reporting included subtle warnings that police would be vigilant in preventing societal discord.

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